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## USE OF A GUIDE BOOK IN TEACHING COMPOSITION

By JAMES FINCH ROYSTER  
University of North Carolina

IN OFFERING A FEW SUGGESTIONS for the use of a guidebook, or handbook, in teaching English composition, I shall not discuss the question whether it is better to use a handbook or a descriptive rhetoric as a textbook in composition classes. But I shall be compelled to contrast the two methods of instruction; and in doing this, I cannot pass by the great advantage of the guidebook over the descriptive rhetoric in demanding more work of the teacher. It follows that when the teacher gives larger effort the pupil is likely to be more diligent and to get greater benefit from his instruction. Improvement of the pupil is, of course, the aim of all our teaching.

Intelligent effort on the part of the teacher is demanded in using a composition manual, first of all, because the usual book of this sort cannot justly be given to pupils to be read at great length, nor consecutively. The processes of learning the mechanics of writing hardly arrange themselves in consecutive order. Surely there is no ordained succession; for one book, on very good grounds, follows one order; another text, on equally good grounds, pursues another. To follow the same arrangement for every class, or indeed for every member of the same class, is probably very poor teaching. The most nearly imperative needs of each class should be found out at the beginning of the year, if the teacher does not know them from the previous session; and the language deficiencies of each pupil should be recognized. Emphatic instruction should fall upon the errors most in vogue in the class, no matter where they are treated in the guidebook. The teacher should make the selection and establish the order of instruction to fit the needs of every composition class in his charge.

Understanding the individual pupil is desirable in every case; in teaching composition by the handbook method it is imperative. Every teacher of experience knows that a few minutes of individual instruction is more effective in weeding out the errors in a pupil's writing than is mass instruction of several hours. The guidebook in this form of instruction serves as a common meeting ground between student and teacher. Good results may be obtained by using a notebook with the manual. In his notebook the pupil may be required to record the most important errors he makes in his writing and to correct these errors on the same sheet in a column parallel with that in which he has written his mistakes. The pupil should be further required to consult the handbook in regard to his errors before he cor-

rects them. Easy reference for this purpose is provided in the usual manual by a system of convenient numbering for the most common errors in school compositions.

In connection with a guidebook, exercise material provided to give the pupil a chance to do properly what he has done improperly should be used in large measure. There is no need, again, to offer exercises in a formal predetermined order; surely there is no economy in demanding of the whole class exercises in practices that the majority of the class perform well. A crying need throughout the course of instruction in composition is no repetition of matter that the larger number of pupils know and that all with reasonable effort should know, but much repetition and then more repetition of principles the majority of the class do not know and have had no chance of knowing.

Exercises and themes are required for the purpose of fixing correct language forms as the habits of the pupils. Only practice fixes habits. No amount of talk and discussion about a form or a construction, no amount of what is loosely called "understanding" it, is of great worth unless practice makes the proper use of it habitual. I may "know" thoroughly all the directions for performing the feat of holding my left ear with my right hand and my nose with my left and of reversing the position of my hands at a quick word of command, but I make a jumble of hands, ears, and nose without practice in co-ordinating these movements. I produce no greater confusion of bodily parts, however, than I am likely to make of sentences, clauses, and phrases if I am suddenly called upon to arrange them and have nothing to depend upon other than my theoretical knowledge of how they should be co-ordinated.

Danger lies in making exercise work in illustration of errors monotonous. A continued stream of "don'ts" from the text is, also, disheartening. Some of the precept and example work may well be directly didactic. Some of it surely should be put into a more attractive form. Various projects may be used to avoid sameness and to add interest. The teacher, again, will probably prefer to make his own projects to carry the material he has chosen for his own class. He will undoubtedly wish to do this if he desires to do his own teaching. One suggestion of the kind of project that may be made of a "don't" I may, however, offer. The injunction, "do not write clauses as co-ordinate when they are not of equal importance," may, for instance, be chosen as a subject for an argument or a debate and may be stated

as a proposition, as, "Resolved, that clauses should not be written as co-ordinate when they are not of equal importance." Each of the two sides may be assigned to two or more pupils, and the utility of the "rule" may be debated as practice in simple argumentation and as a means of fixing the sentence principle in the minds of the pupils. The subject is likely to prove of just as great genuine interest, and it is of just as immediate importance to us, as the question of Japanese immigration into California or the effect of the sale of patent medicines upon the Eskimos or similar far-away subjects common in inter-scholastic debates. Pupils may, too, be required to collect local illustrations—right and wrong—of words, forms, and constructions noticed in the textbook. Newspapers may be read with the intention of comparing their practice with that laid

down in the guidebook. If contradictions appear, who is wrong? Is it necessary for either to be wrong? Are there different bases of correctness? These and a dozen other important and interesting questions will naturally come out of projects of this kind. Schemes for self-criticism with the aid of a guidebook of composition will suggest themselves to an imaginative teacher. And if the handbook has no special apparatus for instruction in vocational or professional writing, its material may easily be related to the practice of writing business letters, telegrams, technical expositions, news stories and similar special forms of composition.

The greatest service a handbook can render is that of furnishing a definite body of directions to guide the movements of expression into good habits through exercise and practice.

## THREE GHOSTS IN A STOVE

By HENRY McCUNE DARGAN

University of North Carolina

ONE DISCOURAGING Monday afternoon, when I had just returned from the classroom with the chalk of battle still dry on my hands, I addressed the following remarks to my study-stove:

"Whenever I tear up eight or ten sheets of contemporary periodical literature and stuff the pieces down your throat, you do not look out of the window or play with your watch-charm. If I rip off a few quires from the broken-backed old classical dictionary thrown away in my woodbox and dump them on top of the contemporary literature, you do not interrupt me to ask whether a two-page theme is a theme of two pages. Then, if I apply even a very feeble sliver of the Promethean torch to your combustibles, you do not blow the flame out with a yawn or a laugh. Furthermore, if I use my head properly to keep you supplied with wood, your cheeks are soon suffused with a grateful glow, and. . . ."

I am not expert in riding unbroken metaphors, and this one was already beginning to buck; so I was relieved as well as surprised when the lid of the stove tilted up mysteriously, and an apparition, like the genii in the Arabian Nights bottle, took shape in the smoke. This figure was a sturdy, clumsy, imperious old fellow in eighteenth century costume, with a soiled waistcoat and an ill-fitting wig; after staring at me disagreeably for a moment or two, he cleared his throat to speak, and I at once recognized the phantasm of Doctor Samuel Johnson.

"Sir, you mistake the whole matter," he declared,

harshly. "A stove and a student must not be confounded; there can be no analogy between objects essentially dissimilar. The stove overpowers the dictionary; but it is your business, sir, to see that the dictionary takes possession of the student. You have no right to sit here, idly complimenting this piece of iron-mongery, when you are only too well aware that your scholars have not learned what you are paid to teach them. Words, sir, words are the crystalization of past wisdom and the instruments of further acquisition; and what do your pupils know about words? How many of them can construe correctly all the indispensable polysyllables? . . ."

At this juncture the doctor's voice, which had been distinct and resonant at first, weakened uncomfortably; and, as he continued to harangue me, I noticed that his portly frame dwindled. The longer his words, the fainter grew his tones and the shorter his stature, until he presently collapsed into nothingness—whispering as he went that "failure to instruct youth in the exact significancies of language is a labefaction of all pedagogical principle."

I have notions of my own about this topic, and was beginning to soliloquize upon it; when suddenly the stove-lid came up again and a second spirit appeared. So far as I could discover, this was the ghost of nobody in particular; merely a little girl about ten years old, with a soapy face, yellow pigtails, a quaint gingham frock, and an apron made—incongruously—out of an American flag. Standing on the stove as if it were a platform, she recited the following edifying verses: